

Aljazeera: One Organization, Two Messages

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Top U.S. officials are now offering praise for Aljazeera, a Qatar-owned and -based news network that broadcasts in both Arabic and English-language versions. Aljazeera, not carried by any U.S. cable networks and broadcast locally in only a few cities, depends on its English-language website to reach an increasingly large U.S. audience. The problem is that the content of Aljazeera's English site differs, at times radically, from that of the Arabic version. To illustrate: at a time when Aljazeera is polishing a new image as a champion of media reform and freedom, one of its most popular Arabic television programs is that of fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood preacher Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, whose twinkly grin accompanies virulently anti-American and anti-Semitic diatribes interspersed with expressions of support for censorship of "anti-Islamic" messages. This is not to say that Aljazeera English is without problems of its own or that Aljazeera Arabic is entirely flawed; the point is that the messages are often different.

Makeover and Growing Influence

Aljazeera is striving to move beyond allegations of anti-Americanism garnered during the Iraq war, as well as perceived association with radical Islamism due to its habitual airing of grievances by Usama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Hamas, Hizballah, and other violent extremists. The network now reports critically, though selectively, on dictators and their security apparatuses. As a consequence, Aljazeera offices have been ransacked from Cairo to Sana, while staff and reporters have been harassed, detained, abducted, or worse -- as when one cameraman was killed by regime forces in Libya. Meanwhile, Aljazeera's online English-language viewership has reportedly skyrocketed. On February 23, the network issued a press release announcing that it had given Comcast executives more than 13,000 letters from Americans demanding access to the channel, and it has submitted more than 40,000 emails as well. This campaign has reportedly led to ongoing talks with both Comcast and Time Warner.

In Washington, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asserted last week that the network "has been the leader in that they are literally changing people's minds...It is really effective. In fact, viewership of Aljazeera is going up in the U.S. because it's real news." And during an April 21 meeting of Democratic Party donors, President Obama was caught by a live microphone praising Qatari ruler Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, whom he had met earlier that day and who has used the emirate's huge natural gas revenues to pump millions of dollars into Aljazeera. The president described him as a "pretty influential guy. He is a big booster, big promoter of democracy all throughout the Middle East. Reform, reform, reform -- you're seeing it on Aljazeera. Now, he himself is not reforming significantly -- there's no big move toward democracy in Qatar. But you know part of the reason is that the per capita income in Qatar is \$145,000 a year. That will dampen a lot of conflict."

Yet Aljazeera's reformist reputation does not hold up to heavier scrutiny. Qatari prime minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani once remarked (in a cable released by WikiLeaks) that the network's "ability to influence public opinion is a substantial source of leverage for Qatar." The cable further implied that the network was willing to adjust its coverage in exchange for political favors. In this light, Aljazeera's publicly acknowledged goal of agitating against the status quo reflects active political interests rather than journalistic integrity.

English vs. Arabic Web Content

Aljazeera English must be distinguished from its Arabic counterpart in several regards. While the Arabic website reflects Qatar's regional interests, the English site has a greater internationalist bent to its reporting. Moreover, Aljazeera English reports favorably on many issues that are largely absent from the Arabic site, including low wages, poor working conditions, class conflict, and feminist and other minority groups throughout the Middle East.

Aljazeera Arabic, in contrast, has much less freedom to report on regional developments -- including in Qatar -- than the English site. Very little criticism of Doha can be found in Arabic; consider the zero coverage given to the government's embarrassment over anti-Iranian comments revealed by WikiLeaks. The regional climate and political dealmaking often temper other aspects of Aljazeera's Arabic coverage as well, resulting in delayed or deficient reporting on some events (as in the case of Egypt and Syria) or a failure to report on them altogether (as in Bahrain). Qatar is located between two vying regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, yet the Arabic site almost never reports on internal disputes in those countries, despite the occasional such report on the English site.

Missing In Action on Bahrain

Aljazeera's online Arabic coverage of Bahrain is a glaring example of politics trumping journalism. Saudi Arabia has a vested interest in keeping the island's Sunni monarchy in power and sees Shiite activism there as an Iranian plot. Furthermore, Qatar, like Bahrain, is a GCC member. As a result, Aljazeera Arabic did not report on the hardening of the Bahraini opposition on March 8, when the Coalition for a Bahraini Republic called for an end to the monarchy, nor did it cover protests held there on March 9, 10, and 13, the critical days leading to Saudi Arabia's decision to send troops into Bahrain. Riyadh's March 14 deployment received scant morning coverage -- masquerading, in fact, under the headline "Gulf forces in Bahrain" -- and remained buried throughout the day. Furthermore, when Qatar deployed its own troops to the island in accordance with its GCC commitments, the development was not reported at all on Aljazeera Arabic. Incredibly, while Aljazeera English showed pictures of Saudi troops headed across the causeway connecting the two kingdoms, Aljazeera Arabic's headline read "Bahrain's Government Rejects Foreign Intervention" -- alluding to Iran!

Indeed, rather than report on the grassroots nature of Bahrain's pro-democracy protests, the Arabic website has consistently helped to develop the narrative of a Saudi-Iranian struggle for the island by highlighting Bahrain's connections with the Islamic republic, supposed "foreign plots" within the emirate, and Hizballah's support for Shiite protesters. On April 21, for instance, the author appeared on an hourlong program aired by al-Alam -- Iran's elaborate Arabic-language television channel broadcast from Beirut -- in which the other guests lamented at length on the "total silence" of Arab media regarding the ongoing crackdown in Bahrain, a silence that has not gone unnoticed by Iran.

Slow Start in Syria and Egypt

As unrest broke out in Syria, Aljazeera Arabic initially failed to report on a level worthy of its antiestablishment reputation, possibly in deference to Iran. Its television coverage was conspicuously absent during the first protests, leading to YouTube videos of some demonstrators chanting "Aljazeera, Waynik?" (Aljazeera, where are you?). To be sure, as pressure mounted in Syria, the Arabic channel and website improved its coverage to a level far better than its reporting on Bahrain. Still, the reporting never reached the same level as its English counterpart, whose website carried hopeful commentary such as "The Winds of Change Reach Syria," "The Delusions of Bashar al-Assad," and "The Coming Revolution in Syria?"

One leading Syrian activist noted that although he is regularly featured on Aljazeera English television, he and other prominent Syrian dissidents in exile are never featured on the Arabic television channel. And the website content seems to reflect this: indeed, as the country's April 8 "day of rage" unfolded, Aljazeera English reported "Fresh Protests Erupt in Syria," mentioning several deaths in Deraa; in contrast, the Arabic site's only reference was Assad's meager overture to the country's long-oppressed Kurdish minority.

Even when the Egyptian revolution began on January 25, Aljazeera Arabic got off to a slow start, missing many of the day's events and leaving many Egyptians angry and perplexed. Some attributed the delay to former president Hosni Mubarak's late 2010 visit to Qatar and presumed backroom dealmaking. Others speculated that the network did not want to reduce coverage of its recently featured "Palestine Papers" scoop -- another episode in the long saga of animosity between Aljazeera, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel. Whatever the case, political interests and self-promotion apparently trumped media activism on those momentous first days of Egyptian protests. Possibly as a result, Aljazeera's reported audience in Egypt during the revolution was smaller than that of either Al-Arabiya or Alhurra, according to a phone poll conducted in Cairo and Alexandria at the time and later released by the U.S. government's Broadcasting Board of Governors.

Strategic Overreporting

Aljazeera Arabic online tends to overreport events in Libya and Yemen, countries unfriendly to Qatar, possibly as a means of burying more politically sensitive news stories such as the Bahrain protests. Aljazeera's coverage of every minute development in Libya and Yemen would, in fact, set the journalistic standard if it did not correlate to a paucity of information on other regional developments. For example, in contrast to its underreporting of Syrian protests on April 8, mentioned earlier, Aljazeera Arabic featured a leading story titled "Warnings of a Catastrophe in Misratah," four pieces focused on the Qadhafi regime, and three dedicated to the power struggle in Yemen.

Beware the Spin

In general, Aljazeera Arabic balances groundbreaking news with Qatari interests, however awkward this approach may be. Accordingly, the U.S. audience should understand that the news and viewpoints published on the network's English website are often not seen on the Arabic site, a discrepancy often reflected in the television coverage. Unfortunately, Aljazeera's English/Arabic bifurcation helps to ensure that these constituencies will never see eye to eye. As long as this practice continues, Aljazeera should not be touted as a true reformer or promoter of democracy.

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